

# **How Has War Changed Since the End of the Cold War?**

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The question in this paper’s title is answered directly in the main section of the analysis below. However, as a necessary precursor to that analysis, four caveats or warnings are signaled which bear upon the degree of confidence that should, and should not, be placed in strategic futurology. In the immortal words of Yogi Berra, ‘prediction is difficult, especially about the future.’

## **Four Caveats**

As location is the key to property values, so context is, at least should be, the most important variable in the understanding of war. The necessity to take due account of the central significance of the several contexts of war is the first of our four caveats. The analysis of recent changes in war presented in the next section of the essay need to be informed by the warnings provided here.

For the West, at least, twelve of the past fifteen years can fairly be described as an inter-war period. That brief no-name era, usually referred to neutrally as the Post-Cold War period, came to an explosive end on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. The shake-down years after more than four decades of Cold War were bound to be confusing and disorienting. The information revolution in warfare that had been brewing slowly for decades, but which picked up speed in the 1990s, paled into near insignificance compared with the

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<sup>1</sup> Most of the issues raised in this paper are discussed at length in my new book, *Future Warfare* (London: Cassell, forthcoming).

political revolution that brought down the Evil Empire almost without bloodshed. As always, politics rules. The dominant contextual fact about war for the United States over the past fifteen years has, of course, been geopolitical. The abrupt demise of the Soviet rival, meaning the sudden absence of a balancing power, outstrips in significance any and all other features of the inter-war period of the 1990s. Furthermore, that geopolitical fact continues today and is as certain to continue for many years, as it is also certain to pass into history in its turn. It would be difficult to exaggerate the importance of the United States being left as the last of the great powers still standing as such at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

#### Four Caveats

1. Do not neglect war's political, social, and cultural contexts.
2. Defense establishments prepare for the problems they prefer to solve, rather than those that a cunning enemy might pose.
3. Trend spotting is not a good guide to the future.
4. Surprises happen!

War has several contexts--most prominently the political, social, cultural, and technological. When we discuss how war has changed, it is vital not to fall into the error of treating it as if it were an autonomous phenomenon. Concern that that is happening is the first of four caveats worth noting regarding the character of the current process of U.S. military transformation. Some of the "grammar" of war assuredly has changed since 1989, to put the matter in Clausewitzian terms, but not the primacy of the logic of policy.<sup>2</sup> There is a perennial temptation to misread recent and contemporary trends in warfare as signals of some momentous, radical shift. As often as not, the character of

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<sup>2</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, Michael Howard and Peter Paret ed. and trans. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), p.605.

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warfare in a period is shaped, even driven, much more by the political, social, and strategic contexts, than it is by changes integral to military science.

The sense of the second caveat is best conveyed by a familiar ironic lament: ‘just when we found the answer, they changed the question.’ There is some danger that the United States may be committed to a process of military transformation that is keyed to an inappropriately narrow vision of future war. Moreover, it is a vision that may lack empathy for development of a Plan B, should Plan A deliver less than decisive success. In 1914, Imperial Germany was prepared solely for a swift war of rapid movement; it had to learn about linear siege warfare on the grand scale in real time. In 1941-42, Nazi Germany expected, and was equipped to effect, a swift and decisive war of movement. When that ‘Plan A’ was thwarted, as in 1914 there was no ‘Plan B.’ Arguably, German military planners had prepared their semi-modern forces to wage the wrong kind of war. The tactical excellence of the Germans enabled them repeatedly to adjust to the unanticipated demands of attritional combat, though ultimately their resource deficiencies proved fatal. The dramatic German examples are cited simply in order to emphasize the prevalence and potency of the factor of surprise. Not for nothing did Clausewitz insist that ‘[w]ar is the realm of uncertainty’, as well as ‘the realm of chance.’<sup>3</sup> Are we confident that the process of information-led military transformation will produce military capability able to answer the questions that future policy and strategy will throw its way?

The third caveat that should give pause to those inclined to indulge in confident prognoses is the notorious unreliability of trend analysis. Even the most accurate identification and analysis of recent and current trends cannot offer a reliable guide to the future. Trends come in bunches, they interact both with each other and with their contexts, and it is their consequences, rather than they themselves, which make the future. Trend spotting in the 1900s did not point unerringly to the Great War of the 1910s. The 1920s did not flag the perils of the 1930s. More recently, in the 1970s not many among us anticipated the apparent nonlinearity of the collapse of the Soviet

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p.101.

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imperium in the late 1980s. Defense planning geared to fit a world shaped by the trends identified today is almost certain to rest on shaky assumptions. To repeat, it is the consequences of current trends that matter. Understanding those consequences is an art, not a science, and its most vital need by way of technical support is a crystal ball. If crystal balls are unavailable, the only resource is guesswork. When that guesswork is historically educated and dressed up in scenario form its prospective value is maximized, always bearing in mind the fact of our irreducible ignorance. There should be no need to remind people that no fancy methodology as an aid to defense planning can overcome the laws of physics. The future has not happened. Beware of those who are addicted to the use of the thoroughly misleading concept, the foreseeable future. The future is not foreseeable, period.

Finally, our fourth caveat about predictions concerning future war is the record of past achievement in that regard. There is no reason to believe that the theorists and officials of today are any more gifted in the prophecy department than were their predecessors. Bluntly stated, the historical record of tolerably accurate strategic futurology is anything but impressive. There is usually someone who sees the future with uncanny perceptiveness, but, alas, at the time it is impossible to know his or her identity.

The following are the four caveats suggested in this paper as being analogous to health warning labels that should be affixed to strategic predictions constructed from recent experience:

1. War should not be approached in ways that would divorce it from its political, social, and cultural contexts.
2. Defense establishments are apt to develop impressive military solutions to problems that they prefer to solve, rather than those that a cunning or lucky foe might pose.
3. Trend spotting and analysis is not a very helpful guide to the future. The strategic future is driven by the consequences of the trends we see: trends which interact and can trigger nonlinear developments.

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4. Surprises happen! Some are agreeable; some are not. It is unlikely that we will prove any more farseeing than were our predecessors. Beware of the working of the law of unintended consequences. Because war is a duel, there are intelligent adversaries out there who will strive to deny us a mode of warfare that privileges the undoubted strengths of our transforming military power.

## **Warfare, 1989-2004: What has Changed?**

The full title of this discussion should read, ‘what has changed and what has not?’ In order to keep this discussion disciplined, I will answer the question by way of making eight points. These are selected for their breadth of coverage of recent and current changes in warfare; the empirically verifiable, the distinctly arguable, and the falsely proclaimed.

### Warfare, 1989-2004: What Has Changed?

1. Not the nature of war.
2. Third-rate enemies.
3. So-called ‘new wars’ aren’t.
4. No balance of power.
5. Military transformation will be strategically disappointing.
6. State-on-state war is down but not out.
7. For two or three decades at most, religiously-motivated terrorism will be the threat of the era.
8. There are two transformations underway:
  - One narrowly military;
  - The other in attitudes towards war – this one is reversible.

### **1. The unchanging nature of war**

Whatever about warfare is changing, it is not, and cannot be, its very nature. If war’s nature were to alter, it would become something else. This logical and empirical

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point is important, because careless reference to the allegedly changing nature of war fuels expectations of dramatic, systemic developments that are certain to be disappointed. The nature of war in the twenty-first century is the same as it was in the twentieth, the nineteenth, and indeed, in the fifth century BC. In all of its more important, truly defining features, the nature of war is eternal. No matter how profound a military transformation may be, and strategic history records many such, it must work with a subject that it cannot redefine.<sup>4</sup>

Fortunately, we are reasonably well educated on this matter, at least we should be if we have read Clausewitz, Sun-tzu and Thucydides. The great Prussian tells us that “[a]ll wars are things of the same nature”.<sup>5</sup> Also, he advises that war has two natures, “objective” and “subjective”.<sup>6</sup> The former is permanent, while the latter is subject to frequent change. The character of war is always liable to change, as its several contexts alter, but its nature is fixed. Clausewitz explains that “war, though conditioned by the particular characteristics of states and their armed forces, must contain some more general – indeed a universal element with which every theorist ought above all to be concerned”.<sup>7</sup> The four elements of the “climate of war” are alas, all too permanent: they are “danger, exertion, uncertainty, and chance”.<sup>8</sup> To which we can add such other gems from the Clausewitzian as friction, his two remarkable trinities,<sup>9</sup> and his emphasis on the moral qualities. Given the technophilia that is so characteristic of the U.S. defense community, it is useful to recall the Prussian’s judgment that “[v]ery few of the new manifestations in war can be ascribed to new inventions or new departures in ideas. They

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<sup>4</sup> The outstanding historical study is MacGregor Knox and Williamson Murray, eds., *The Dynamics of Military Revolution, 1300-2050* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, p.606 (emphasis in the original).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p.85.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p.593.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p.104.

<sup>9</sup> His primary trinity is “composed of primordial violence, hatred and enmity, which are to be regarded as a blind natural force; of the play of chance and probability within which the creative spirit is free to roam; and of its element of subordination, as an instrument of policy, which makes it subject to reason alone.” His claim that those three aspects mainly concern, respectively, the people, the commander and his army, and the government, can usefully be regarded as a secondary trinity. Ibid., p.89. See Edward J. Villacres and Christopher Bassford, “Reclaiming the Clausewitzian Trinity,” *Parameters*, Vol. 25, No.3 (Autumn 1995), pp.9-19. It is vital to distinguish between the two trinities, because the popular presentation of the trinitarian thesis as people, army, and government, has misled some theorists into believing that there was a distinct Clausewitzian era which is now defunct.

result mainly from the transformation of society and new social conditions”.<sup>10</sup> It is true that he was writing prior, albeit only just prior, to the Industrial Revolution on the European continent, but his empirical claim stands as a helpful corrective to the fashionable view that new technologies remake the strategic world. Above all else, Clausewitz insists that war is an instrument of policy. What that means is that war should be waged not for the goal of victory, necessary though that usually is, but rather for the securing of an advantageous peace. I am moved to coin the aphorism that ‘there is more to war than warfare’.<sup>11</sup>

In our understandable and necessary focus on what is changing in the character of war, it is scarcely less necessary to keep steadily in mind just what it is about war and warfare that has not, and will not, change. For example, war comes with fog, period! Similarly, to adapt a popular bumper-sticker phrase, ‘friction happens’.

## **2. Third-rate enemies**

The experience of warfare of any kind tells you useful things about your armed forces. Every profession needs to practice its skills. But it is well to remember that for the past fifteen years America’s foes have been Panamanians, Iraqis, Somali clansmen, Bosnian Serbs, Serbs again, hapless Talibans, Iraqis in a return fixture, and, of course, the well networked fanatics of al-Qa’ida. A tradition of victory is very important, but it is apt to feed uncritical expectations of victory in the future. It can mislead people into discounting the contextual factors critical to success, in favor of the military prowess that we demonstrated.

It is worth recalling what went wrong, as well as right, in Panama; how the Gulf War of 1991 was waged and concluded in such a manner that a second round would be necessary; how the United States was defeated strategically in Somalia; how uncertain was the success achieved in Bosnia; how incompetently the war over Kosovo was conducted in 1999; how the victory of 2001 in Afghanistan has restored the traditional

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<sup>10</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, p.515.

<sup>11</sup> Peter Browning explains that “[w]arfare is the act of making war. War is a relationship between two states or, if a civil war, two groups. Warfare is only a part of war, although the essential part.” *The Changing Nature of Warfare: The Development of Land Warfare from 1792 to 1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p.2.



power of the warlords in the countryside, a power fuelled by the cash crop of the poppy; and how the on-going unpleasantness in Iraq underlines yet again the truth in the sayings that war is about peace, and, as cited already, that there is more to war than warfare. With the arguable exception of the strategically outstanding al-Qa'ida, since the Berlin Wall came down all of America's enemies have been belligerents of the third-rate or less. And as I have just indicated, even against little league players, strategic success has by no means been achieved elegantly and definitively. Every exercise of American arms since 1989, with the exception of the war against al-Qa'ida (discussed below), was an example of warfare that the country could not lose. Nonetheless, defeat somehow was contrived in Somalia, as the newly installed Clinton Administration failed to take a proper grip on the poisoned chalice bequeathed by Bush the First.

It is more likely than not that most of America's enemies in the near future will continue to be at least as awkwardly and inconveniently asymmetrical as they have been over the past fifteen years. However, it would be grossly imprudent to assume that they will all be led by politicians as grand strategically incompetent as Saddam Hussein or Slobodan Milosevic. There is probably a General Aideed lurking out there, not to mention a General Giap. A no less troubling thought is recognition of the certainty that America's strategic future will witness enemies initially of the second rate, and eventually of the first. It is true that armed forces do not have to score a 'perfect ten' on some abstract metric of relative excellence. Fortunately, they only need to be better than the enemy of the day. Nonetheless, if one is blessed with a long succession of wars against adversaries who are strikingly inferior in material terms, it is all but impossible to assess the prowess of your forces and their preferred way of war. One may choose to recall the old aphorism that 'unless you have fought the Germans, you don't really know war.' That thought, though hopefully not its precise national example, holds for the future.

### **3. 'New' and not-so-new wars**

The several complex Wars of Yugoslavian Succession, the Wars of Soviet Succession in the Caucasus region, and the near perpetual warfare across West and

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Central Africa—not forgetting the Sudan and Somalia—have persuaded some commentators that we have entered an era of ‘new wars’.<sup>12</sup> These wars, allegedly, are post-Clausewitzian, which would be an impossibility, of course.<sup>13</sup> We are told that the trend in warfare is sharply away from interstate conflicts. Instead, the tide is running for intercommunal and transnational ethnic and religious strife. These are wars about identity, as well as historic wrongs, myths and legends; they are not about reasons of state.

The truth of the matter is that war is not changing its character, let alone miraculously accomplishing the impossible and changing its nature. There has always been intercommunal strife. It is a global phenomenon today, but then it always has been. We should not exaggerate its incidence. When great empires and federations are dissolved, what would one expect other than a belligerent scramble by communities to seize their historic opportunity to achieve the sovereign homeland that they crave? In the political context of the 1990s, the prevalence of intrastate warfare was entirely to be expected. Such warfare will continue in the future, though probably with less frequency. To repeat, such warfare is neither new nor is it bound to be the dominant trend for the future.

### **4. Where is the balance of power?**

The short answer is that the United States is the balance of power. Militarily, though not economically or culturally, America is the hegemon by default. It is the last great power still standing, at least for a while. This is strictly a temporary condition. There are two reasons why would-be and potential rivals currently acquiesce in America’s global activism on behalf of its concept of international order. The minor

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<sup>12</sup> Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), was a significant period piece. The founding theoretical text for the thesis that war is undergoing far more than just a light makeover, is the brilliant book by Martin van Creveld, *The Transformation of War* (New York: Free Press, 1991). In the opinion of this theorist van Creveld is brilliantly wrong, but there is no denying the quality of his argument.

<sup>13</sup> For the illustration of error, see Jan Willem Honig, “Strategy in a Post-Clausewitzian Setting,” in Gert de Nooy, ed., *The Clausewitzian Dictum and the Future of Western Military Strategy* (The Hague: Kluwer Law International, 1997), pp. 109-21. I take no prisoners among the prophets of an allegedly post-Clausewitzian future in my essay, “Clausewitz, History, and the Future Strategic World”, in *Contemporary Essays*, The Occasional No.47 (Shrivenham, UK: Strategic and Combat Studies Institute, 2004), pp. 1-24.

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reason is that much of what the United States does serves the interests of others. The major reason is that the greater among those others have no practical choice at present other than a reluctant acquiescence. Let there be no illusions. America's guardianship role, its performance as global sheriff, as I have described the matter in a recent book, rests solely on its unbalanced power.<sup>14</sup> The country is very great in all the dimensions of power, most pronouncedly in the military. The United States may succeed in prolonging the lifespan of its military pre-eminence.

But it would be a mistake to believe, with current policy, that potential rivals can be so discouraged from competing that they will resign themselves to play supporting roles in the U.S. orchestration of world security politics. The stakes are just too high. As I have sought to indicate already, the past fifteen years comprised principally a postwar, or interwar, period. The political and strategic behavior of those years reflected the temporary context provided by a world abruptly deprived of its balance of power architecture. The U.S. superpower found itself tempted to intervene around the world in wars of discretion, rather than necessity. Because the 1990s presented the United States with highly discretionary conflicts, theorists were able to propagate two plausible fallacies in particular. The first was the partial nonsense of an alleged American aversion to casualties.<sup>15</sup> The second was the myth that we had entered an era of post-heroic warfare.<sup>16</sup> A greater sensitivity to American history, as well as some empirical research

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<sup>14</sup> Colin S. Gray, *The Sheriff: America's Defense of the New World Order* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2004). America's so called "soft power" is important, but it should not be exaggerated. For a sheriff the ability to shoot, preferably straight, is essential, soft power should follow. A recent restatement of the soft power thesis is Joseph S Nye Jr., *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World's Only Superpower Can't Go It Alone* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>15</sup> An authoritative study of American opinion concluded thus: "We also found that the belief that the U.S. public is especially casualty-shy, widely accepted by policymakers, civilian elites, and military officers, is a myth. All populations dislike casualties, and democratic societies are particularly able to express this dislike. However, our study found evidence that the American public will accept casualties if they are necessary to accomplish a declared mission, and the mission is being actively pushed by the nation's leadership". Peter D. Feaver and Richard H. Kohn, "Conclusion: The Gap and What It Means for American National Security", in Feaver and Kohn, eds., *Soldiers and Civilians: The Civil-Military Gap and American National Security* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), p.467. The same message is conveyed in Paul Cornish, "Myth and Reality: US and UK Approaches to Casualty Aversion and Force Protection", *Defence Studies*, Vol. 3, No.2 (Summer 2003), pp.121-28.

<sup>16</sup> See Edward N. Luttwak, "Towards Post-Heroic Warfare," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol.74, No.3 (May/June 1995), pp. 109-22. As a poet once wrote, "happy is the land that needs no heroes". Unfortunately, that land is not, and will not be, the United States, no matter how enthusiastically the armed forces embrace unmanned combat vehicles, and grow a new breed of cyber-warriors to wage bloodless warfare.

on attitudes, past and present, should have promptly shot these myths down in flames. American society has always been casualty-averse when either it does not care about the issues in dispute, or it realizes that Washington is not seriously seeking decisive victory.

#### **5. The strategic potency of a transforming military will be disappointing.**

‘The Big Story’ about U.S. defense policy of recent years, a story that is certain to run on for a long time to come, is of course the drive to ‘transform.’ The process is unstoppable. It is driven by cultural impulse, by technological opportunity, and by a narrow, but understandable and praiseworthy, determination to perform more efficiently. Whether or not it is inspired by strategic need is another matter. American strategic and military culture is incapable of offering much resistance to the seductive promise of a way of war that seeks maximum leverage from the exploitation of information technologies. This is a trend that will continue. Indeed, it would be amazing if it did not, given the long history of American machine mindedness. Foreign observers, the most acute of whom at present are the Chinese, long have noticed America’s love affair with technology.<sup>17</sup> From the evidence so far, it would seem fair comment to observe that the transformation that is now underway should enable the U.S. armed forces to do better what they already do well.

It has to follow that military transformation on the current official model does not address the real problems that beset American strategic performance. To quote Lt. Colonel Antulio J. Echevarria, currently with the Army War College, the U.S. military has “more a way of battle than an actual way of war”.<sup>18</sup> Unfortunately, perhaps, war is not only about the ever more precise delivery of stand-off firepower, and – if need be – the swift and hopefully decisive maneuver of mechanized ground forces. We can predict

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<sup>17</sup> Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, *Unrestricted Warfare: Assumptions on War and Tactics in the Age of Globalization*, FBIS trans. (Beijing: PLA Literature Arts Publishing House, February 1999), should be required reading in Washington. To quote just one worthwhile nugget, the authors tell us that “[h]igh technology, as spoken of in generalities, cannot become a synonym for future warfare, nor is information technology – which is one of the high technologies of the present age and which seems to occupy an important position in the makeup of all modern weapons – sufficient to name a war.” (On the 2<sup>nd</sup> p. of ch.1).

<sup>18</sup> Antulio J. Echevarria II, *Toward an American Way of War* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, March 2004), p.1.

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that although the transformation push may well succeed and be highly impressive in its military-technical accomplishments, it is likely to miss the most vital marks.

There are a number of reasons for this rather harsh judgment.

First, high-tech transformation will have only modest value, because war is a duel and all of America's foes out to 2020 will be significantly asymmetrical. The more intelligent among them, as well as the geographically more fortunate as well as the luckier, will pursue ways of war that do not privilege U.S. strengths.

Second, the military potential of this transformation, as with all past transformations, is being undercut by the unstoppable processes of diffusion which spread technology and ideas.<sup>19</sup>

Third, the transformation that is being sought appears to be oblivious to the fact claimed here already, that there is more to war than warfare. War is about the peace it will shape. It is not obvious that the current process of military transformation will prove vitally useful in helping improve America's strategic performance. Specifically, the country needs to approach the waging of war as political behavior for political purposes. Sometimes one is moved to the despairing conclusion that Clausewitz wrote in vain, for all the influence he has had on the American way of war. The British historian, Jeremy Black, provides food for thought for those among us who are in danger of becoming over excited about the military, and just possibly, the strategic, benefits of transformation. Black writes:

In its fundamentals, war changes far less frequently and significantly than most people appreciate. This is not simply because it involves a constant – the willingness of organized groups to kill and, in particular, to risk death – but also

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<sup>19</sup> Excellent analyses of diffusion are on offer in the historical essays in Emily O. Goldman and Leslie C. Eliason, eds., *The Diffusion of Military Technology and Ideas* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003). A general thrust of the book is to emphasize the great significance of local culture in shaping the ways in which, or even whether, foreign technologies and ideas are adopted and adapted. Analysts of asymmetrical warfare, take note!

because the material culture of war, which tends to be the focus of attention, is less important than its social, cultural and political contexts and enablers. These contexts explain the purposes of military action, the nature of the relationship between the military and the rest of society, and the internal structures and ethos of the military. Having “high-tech,” the focus of much discussion about the future of war, is not the same as winning particular wars, and anyway does not delimit the nature of conflict.<sup>20</sup>

Could it be that U.S. defense policy is pursuing the wrong kind of transformation? By way of a Parthian shot, consider the recent and current warfare in Iraq in the light of the centrality of the concept of ‘information dominance’ to the anticipated success of transformed forces. Might it be that the successful conduct of war requires not merely information, but also knowledge and understanding of kinds that cannot be provided by the engines of transformation?

## **6. Interstate war, down but far from out.**

Logically, the reverse side of the coin which proclaims a trend favoring political violence internal to states, is the claim that interstate warfare is becoming, or has become, an historical curiosity. Steven Metz and Raymond Millen assure us that “most armed conflicts in coming decades are likely to be internal ones”.<sup>21</sup> That is probably a safe prediction, though we might choose to be troubled by their prudent hedging with the qualifier, “most.” Their plausible claim would look a little different in hindsight were it to prove strictly true, but with the exceptions of one or two interstate nuclear conflicts, say between India and Pakistan, and North Korea and the United States and its allies. The same authors also offer the comforting judgment that “[d]ecisive war between major states is rapidly moving toward history’s dustbin.”<sup>22</sup> It is an attractive claim; it is a shame that it is wrong. War, let alone “decisive war,” between major states currently is enjoying an off season for one main reason. So extreme is the imbalance of military

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<sup>20</sup> Jeremy Black, *War in the New Century* (London: Continuum, 2001), p.114 (emphasis added).

<sup>21</sup> Steven Metz and Raymond Millen, *Future War/Future Battlespace: The Strategic Role of American Landpower* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, March 2003), p.13.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p.7.

power in favor of the United States that potential rivals rule out policies that might lead to hostilities with the superpower. It is fashionable to argue that major interstate war is yesterday's problem—recall that the yesterday in question is barely fifteen years in the past--because now there is nothing to fight about and nothing to be gained by armed conflict. Would that those points were true; unfortunately they are not. The menace of major, if not necessarily decisive, interstate war will return to frighten us when great power rivals feel able to challenge American hegemony. If you read your Thucydides, and Donald Kagan, you will be reminded of the deadly and eternal influence of the deadly triad of motives for war, “fear, honor, and interest.”<sup>23</sup>

## **7. Religiously motivated, catastrophe terrorism.**

Unquestionably, there has been a radical change in the character of the dominant form of terrorism since the end of Cold War. The roots of this phenomenon lie in a crisis within the Islamic domain.<sup>24</sup> However, it is ironic that the United States contributed hugely, though inadvertently, of course, to the al-Qa'ida development with its vast level of support for the holy warriors who defeated the Soviets in Afghanistan. Strategists should never forget the peril of ambush by the malign workings of the law of unintended consequences. Al-Qa'ida is justly regarded today as the defining threat of this era. 9/11 certainly brought down the curtain on the strategically somewhat aimless interwar decade of the 1990s. But does the emergence of such terrorism signal an enduring change in the character of warfare? The answer has to be a resolute 'no.' No guarantees can be offered, but it is as certain as anything can be in the inherently uncertain world of international conflict that al-Qa'ida will lose, and lose decisively. It will be beaten, but not by the United States and assuredly not by the U.S. armed forces.

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<sup>23</sup> Robert B. Strassler, ed., *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to 'The Peloponnesian War,'* Richard Crawley trans. (New York: Free Press, 1996), p.43. Donald Kagan, *On the Origins of War and the Preservation of Peace* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), reinforces Thucydides' enduring wisdom on the subject of the causes of strife. That is scarcely surprising given that Kagan is the world's leading authority on the Peloponnesian War.

<sup>24</sup> See Bernard Lewis, *The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2003).

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Al-Q'aida will be defeated by fellow Muslims devoted to moderate and modernizing policies.<sup>25</sup> Obviously the rest of the world must do what it can to blunt al Qaeda's spear, if only for the urgent purpose of self protection. Al-Qa'ida and associated organizations will be a perennial menace, but they will be beaten decisively as the Islamic world comes to terms, culturally in its own ways, with the modern, even the postmodern, world. That process will take two or three decades, at least. All things are possible, but they are not all equally probable.

By the 2020s and then beyond, the defining threats of the century most likely will stem from a dangerous combination of the return of active great-power geopolitical rivalry, and an accelerating global environmental crisis. Those theorists who would have us believe that in the information age geography does not matter, will be shown to have been comprehensively in error. Global warming inevitably will place a premium upon old fashioned territoriality. To coin a phrase, 'IT grows no potatoes'. Land, indeed access to material resources, will be at a premium, as it has been throughout history.

**8. Two transformations?**

It is plausible, though not necessarily correct, to argue that the post-Cold War period has witnessed not one, but two transformations.

On the one hand, there has been, or rather is, the process of military transformation that has emerged out of the erstwhile great Revolution in Military Affairs debate.

On the other hand, so the claim proceeds, there is an ongoing broad transformation of war, especially of war's cultural context. Some scholars argue that there has been a normative change in attitudes towards war, certainly in attitudes towards

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<sup>25</sup> Al Qaeda's militant ideology is so far from the mainstream of Islamic teaching, so unwelcome to the vast majority of Muslims, and essentially so hopelessly impractical, that it has little future, save as the inspiration for a movement that strategically cannot be more than a nuisance.



**Discussion paper -- does not represent the views of the US Government**

the actual conduct of warfare, and also in attitudes towards the military profession.<sup>26</sup> If one were a liberal optimist, which I am not, one might be tempted to argue that humankind slowly is ceasing to regard warfare as acceptable behavior. In this view, the Clausewitzian dictum that war is an instrument of policy, indeed that it is political behavior conducted by violent means, is becoming obsolete. Evidence for such an alleged trend could include the apparent global popularity of the principle that wars of discretion need to be legitimized by the Security Council of the United Nations. If form follows function, the logic of the claim is that war is ceasing to fulfill any useful function.

In addition to the claim that war is no longer necessary as a practical way to solve problems that have resisted other solutions, there is the assertion that warfare is becoming morally unacceptable. The argument amounts to an insistence that the acceptability of war, that is to say of organized violence for political ends, is declining markedly both for practical reasons of its inutility, and because of a cultural taboo, hopefully one eventually of global domain.

By far the most influential cause of the possible trend towards the delegitimization of warfare is the global media. With live video feeds via satellite to a global market, much of the ugliness of war is brought into homes almost everywhere. The claim is not that there is a trend of moral improvement which regards war as all but immoral, save in the most desperate cases of self-defense, but rather that publics around the world now can see what is perpetrated in their names. Since war, except of the cyber variety, necessarily involves killing people and breaking things, confrontation with some of its brutalities can hardly help but be shocking to those who lead sheltered lives. The global media thrives on warfare and treats it as entertainment and as a spectator sport,<sup>27</sup> all the while hypocritically leading the charge to condemn every deviation from the most pristine standard of what constitutes acceptable military behavior.

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<sup>26</sup> See James C. Kurth, "Clausewitz and the Two Contemporary Military Revolutions: RMA and RAM," in Bradford A. Lee and Karl F. Walling, eds., *Strategic Logic and Political Rationality: Essays in Honour of Michael I Handel* (London: Frank Cass, 2003), pp.275-97. By RAM, Kurth means a "revolution in attitudes' toward the military ... driven by the values of the new post-modern society." P.275.

<sup>27</sup> Colin McInnes, *Spectator-Sport War: The West and Contemporary Conflict* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002).

It is sensible to conclude both that there has been a notable debellicization of the West, of Europe outside the Balkans in particular, but that that trend is vulnerable to contextual change. To regard war as uncivilized, unacceptable, and even all but unthinkable, is a luxury permitted by the absence of dire strategic necessity. The taboo against war, if such it is becoming, will evaporate like morning mist if, or more likely when, bad times of strategic insecurity return. In this case at least, culture is shaped by circumstances.

## **Conclusion: Clausewitz Still Rules!**

Four arguments will serve to conclude this brief exploration into what about war is changing and what is not:

First, the “objective” nature of war, as Clausewitz put it, is not changing at all. His theory of war will apply to all modes of armed conflict in the future. Understanding of that theory is vastly more important than is a grasp of the latest military possibilities enabled by technological, organizational, and doctrinal change.

Second, it is essential to appreciate the significance of the several contexts of war additional to the military. Above all else, the leading driver towards, and in, war, is the political context. Military performance in the conduct of warfare frequently is impacted by the cultural context.

Third, war is about the peace that will follow, it is not a self-validating occurrence. A heavy focus on military transformation tends to obscure the enduring fact that war is about a lot more than warfare. Preeminently, warfare always should be waged with as much regard to the character of the subsequent peace as immediate military necessity allows.

Fourth and finally, one should never forget that over time all trends decline and eventually expire. More accurately perhaps, trends influence each other, and particularly when under the shock influence of some great surprise, they change their character radically, indeed in an apparently nonlinear fashion. The challenge to the defense planner is not to spot the trends of this era, but rather to guess what their consequences may be. As if that were not challenge enough, history suggests that a major source of trouble lurks beyond the power of prediction in Secretary Rumsfeld's concept of the "unknown unknowns."